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BY

BENJ. F. STEVENS

THE COMMERCIAL CLUB OF BOSTON

DECEMBER 18, 1897

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AN ADDRESS

BY

MR. BENJ. F. STEVENS

DELIVERED BEFORE

THE COMMERCIAL CLUB OF BOSTON

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SOME THOUGHTS ON OLD BOSTON.

MR. PRESIDENT AND GENTLEMEN OF THE COMMERCIAL CLUB: I thank you for the opportunity of being with you this evening, and I will endeavor to reciprocate the favor by telling you something about this old town, although what I have to say is not arranged in historical sequence.

The story of Old Boston can never be worn threadbare, although it has been told so often. It presents no new facts: the lanes and alleys of this ancient town are almost as well known as the walks around the State House or the old City Hall. One can almost see the quaint old houses at the North End, with their pretty gardens at the side, wherein our ancestors took so much pride and comfort; every foot of the old streets and noble Common has been tramped over and over where once were the footprints of the Puritans. No, there is nothing new in this subject; everything is old and moss-covered. But what is there that appeals with greater sympathy to the heart of the Bostonian of to-day than the places where our fathers lived, died, and were buried? What better, purer, and nobler thoughts can possibly pass through our minds than those which tell of the trials of that band of Puritans who asked only "for freedom to worship God"? Think of the dreadful privations they endured, so severe that one wonders how they ever managed to sustain life, when they had but the sea in front of them and the howling wilderness at their backs — think of the little fainting babes and the patient, untiring, and enduring mothers, and who will say that the Bostonians of to-day do not owe an incalculable debt of gratitude that our ancient town was settled by those fathers and mothers in Israel of

whom John Fiske, that magnificent writer and thinker, says: "They exhibited an unwonted alliance of intense religious enthusiasm with the instinct of self-government and the spirit of personal independence." Think too of the stalwart sires of the early days sitting through the meeting-house service with the mercury at times below zero — no fires to warm themselves, with their matchlocks on their knees, ready for an Indian or a wolf, yet praising God with sincere devotion. It was not until many, many years after the settlement of Boston that the meeting-houses were warmed. Nay, I can well remember even in the thirties I used to carry from my father's house of a Sunday the old-fashioned foot-warmer filled with heated charcoal, upon which rested my mother's feet for warmth; and it is by going back to those old customs and keeping them in mind that we have a due sense and appreciation of the changes in modern life which we now enjoy.

My remarks, from the very nature of the subject, must be desultory, but I shall try to make them not devoid of some interest, although I am sure that your reading has made you familiar with them. And let me say that no greater amount of good has been achieved by any citizen than by Dr. Edward Everett Hale in his late lectures before the Lowell Institute, in calling the attention of the people to the antiquities of the old town of Boston, which are fast passing from us. The birthplace of Paul Revere and the headquarters of General Gage are still to be seen at the North End of the town, but they will soon disappear and nothing will be left save the old burial-grounds of the town, and a few lanes and alleys and narrow streets. All else will be gone; the taverns where our forefathers used to meet have ceased to be, and the old North End, once the home of the best people of the town, is so changed in its character that one can hardly believe that it ever existed otherwise than in its present condition. There is one monument left which I had nearly forgotten — the old Christ Church, from the belfry of which the lanterns

were hung out as signals for Paul Revere, on the night of his famous ride to Lexington. Long may this old church stand, a memorial of the patriotism of our fathers!

One of the first, perhaps the first, to write a description of the ancient town of Boston was an English voyager named Wood. He began by saying that the town of Boston was two miles northeast from Roxbury, and that the back side of the town towards Roxbury was not more than half a mile over, and that fencing was required to secure the inhabitants' cattle from the wolves. He went on to say that Boston covered an area of about four miles, and was in shape like a pear, the neck at the south end being the stem. Also, he said in continuation, that the town had three hills; upon the top of the highest, which all will recognize as Beacon hill, there were three little rising hills, or spurs, called Trimount, from which mountain a man can overlook all the islands within the bay, as well as observe such ships as are on the coast. On the three hills upon which the town was built, viz., Beacon, Copp's, and Fort hills, forts were built and a beacon erected, which was doubtless that upon Beacon hill as being the highest eminence, and loud, babbling guns were placed to give notice by their redoubled echo to all the sister towns in case of an attack from Indians.

All this and much more that would be useless to repeat was printed in London in 1634, four years after the landing of the Puritans in Boston, or as it was then called Massachusetts bay, of which the town formed a circular portion. Drake tells us in his "Old Landmarks of Boston" that "for a hundred years Boston must be considered as little more than a seashore village, struggling up its thicket-grown hillsides, and that the Indian campfire, the axe of Blackstone, the mattock and spade of Winthrop's band, each have their story and lesson."

It is a matter of belief with many that the redoubtable Myles Standish, he who is described as being broad in the shoulders, deep-chested, with muscles and sinews of steel,

was in 1621 the first white man to tread the beach of the peninsula we call Boston. It is certain that he, with ten companions, sailed from Plymouth within a year after the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, and explored what is now Boston bay. They landed, hobnobbed with the Indian lord of the soil, feasted upon lobsters and boiled codfish, and departed, leaving no trace for the antiquary to follow. The supposition is, however, that Standish and his companions landed on the beach at the north end of the future town, under a high cliff which is thought to have been Copp's hill, where is now the burial place of Cotton and Increase Mather, David Malcom, Edmund Hart, and other eminent worthies.

In William Blackstone, or Blaxton, there undoubtedly stands the first white settler of the peninsula. He is thought to have settled on what is now in the neighborhood of Louisburg square, where there was an excellent spring of water, the knowledge of which, coming to the ears of the Charlestown settlers, induced them to leave and come over to Shawmut, as Boston was then called, as the water in Charlestown was brackish and unfit to drink if the settlers desired to retain their health. Blackstone, in 1633, had fifty acres allotted to him by the town, of which he subsequently sold forty-four acres, being all his purchase excepting six acres, the sale including all his right in and to the peninsula. The price paid for the whole peninsula of Boston was £30, which was assessed upon the inhabitants according to their circumstances and condition. After the purchase of Blackstone's forty-four acres, the authorities laid out upon the land the training field, which was the origin of Boston Common. The six acres retained by him came finally into possession of the great painter, John Singleton Copley, and the lot ran up from the water at Charles street, through Beacon and Walnut streets, into Mount Vernon street, thence into Louisburg square and Pinckney street. From Copley it went to the Mount Vernon proprietors, of which corporation Harrison Gray Otis and Benjamin Joy were prominent owners. The mansion of

Otis stood on a portion of the six-acre lot reserved by Blackstone and subsequently known as the Copley lot, which his son, afterwards Lord Lyndhurst, Lord Chancellor of England, sold to Otis, Joy, and others at the close of the last century. The Otis house stood in the vicinity of the present Somerset Club-house.

The State House is built upon land bought by the State of Massachusetts from the heirs of John Hancock, who inherited it from his uncle Thomas, a well-known merchant of the old town. Its site is where in olden time was the highest point of Beacon hill. Leaving this beautiful building, the design of Charles Bulfinch, a Boston boy, we pass down Park street by the church, and come to the Old Granary Burial-ground.

Thousands upon thousands daily pass and repass the delightful old burial-ground on Tremont street adjoining Park-street Church, known in olden time as the Granary, without giving a thought to the dead who lie within its limits. It is third in point of age: the King's-chapel Burial-ground and Copp's-hill Burial-place being the two oldest. The Granary, in the early part of the eighteenth century, was known as the South Burying-ground. Here rest the remains of the first governor of this Commonwealth under the present Constitution, John Hancock, whose remarkable autograph stands at the head of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. The coffined body of Governor Richard Bellingham, who died in 1672, at the age of eighty-four, was found one hundred years afterward floating around in the ancient vault. As Shurtleff says, "One hundred years form a strong period for such a kind of navigation." Under a very conspicuous monument erected by Benjamin Franklin rest the remains of his parents, and near by is the grave of his uncle Benjamin, for whom the great philosopher and statesman was named.

A tablet directs one to the grave of Woodbridge, who was killed in a duel on the Common in 1728 by Henry Phillips.

Phillips subsequently left the country in one of Peter Faneuil's vessels, and he mourned until the day of his death the death of his young companion, for they were friends till the fatal occurrence. In this enclosure are the remains of many of the eminent men of old colony and provincial times, and where horse-cars bring up with a jerk and go away again at the sound of the starter's whistle lie buried, in addition to Bellingham and Hancock, Governors Bowdoin, Samuel Adams, Sumner, Sullivan, Gore, and Eustis; also Robert Treat Paine, a signer of the Declaration of Independence; Judge Samuel Sewall of noted memory, the author of the famous Diary which bears his name, and who is known as the "Witches' Judge;" Edward Rawson, Secretary of the colony; Peter Faneuil, who gave the Cradle of Liberty to the town; John Phillips, the first mayor of the city; and a long list of other prominent names, among which none is of brighter renown than that of the well-known Revolutionary patriot, Paul Revere, the Son of Liberty and great mechanic, than whom no one did more to secure the liberties of the people.

He was a man of the people, a Boston boy, born in 1731, and brought up to his father's trade of a goldsmith. He was the friend of James Otis, John Adams, Samuel Adams, Joseph Warren, and the other patriots of the day. He it was of whom Longfellow wrote so beautifully and has immortalized. Let us honor these dear departed ones who in their lives were the tried and true friends of American liberty.

Antiquaries may know of the fact, but I am not sure that our little world here in Boston does, that in 1775, near the centre of our beautiful Common, the British raised a fort, the remains of which within a comparatively few years were visible; and I am not sure that if one walks to the south of the frog pond he will not find the hill which served to overlook with its mounted cannon the then town of Boston.

By the way, old Governor Richard Bellingham, who died in 1672, lived on Tremont street, not a stone's throw from

where we are now sitting, where Houghton & Dutton's window shines so beautifully at night. Sir Henry Vane while governor lived in a small house on Queen, now Court street. Governor John Winthrop lived on Washington street between Spring lane and the lot upon which the Old South Church, the real Old South, now stands. Isaac Johnson, the husband of Lady Arbella, daughter of the Earl of Lincoln, lived in School street just below where the City Hall now stands. He owned the whole square between Court and School streets, and between Washington and Tremont streets, and was said to have been, next to Blackstone, the largest landholder of those days.

The ancient landmarks of Boston have nearly all disappeared with the growth of the town; they can be counted upon the fingers, and but few of the streets, lanes, and alleys upon which our ancestors lived, and through which they took their daily walks, bear their original names. How far modern taste has improved them is a question. What is now Washington street was then Orange street, from the Neck to Essex street; from Essex street passing by to Bethune's corner (West street) to Winter street it was Newbury street; from Winter street to School street it was Marlborough street, named after that great soldier of Queen Anne's day, John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough; and from School street to Dock square it was Cornhill, in which locality were the dry-goods shops, and where the late philanthropist and merchant, Amos Lawrence, laid the foundation of his fortune, a large portion of which he laid out so nobly. Here, too, with him was his brother Abbott, whose residence was on Park street, the house now known as the Union Club. He was, after the close of his mercantile career, minister to Great Britain.

Hollis street, where the beautiful theatre now is, was originally called Harvard street, and the church, as the theatre was then, was that of the famous Mather Byles, the wit, of whom so many stories have been told, and the friend of the English poet, Pope. A reminiscence occurs to me. When I was a

boy the two daughters of Dr. Byles were prim old ladies living in what had been their father's house; it set back from Common street, which instead of going through what is now Tremont street turned and went into Washington street. On cutting through and extending Tremont street about 1830, or, as it was usually called, Tremont road, it became necessary to cut through a part of their lawn, which destroyed the appearance of their property, the remainder of which was taken by the city and sold; this vandalism, as those two ancient dames called it, disturbed their equanimity, but the old house had to go. As a little boy living not far off, I well remember their appearance and prim ways, although it is more than sixty-five years ago; they berated the workmen in a most lively manner as the cutting went on, and never got over the sacrilege, as they termed the march of improvement. For about half a century after the royal government had ceased to exist in these States, they retained their love of and strict adherence to the belief in kings and monarchies, and actually refused to acknowledge that American independence had transferred their allegiance to new rulers. They worshipped at old Trinity Church on Summer street. When in good humor they would relate with pride their walking on Boston Common arm in arm with Gen. Sir William Howe and Lord Percy, whose career at Lexington is known to nearly every school-boy in the land. One of these ancient relics died in 1835, the other in 1837, stout, unflinching royalists to the last.

Winter and Summer streets have always borne the same names since from lanes they passed into streets, about 1650. Bedford street was called Pond street; and Milk street, School street, and Beacon street were the same as now. Boylston street was Frog lane, State street was King street, and Court street was Queen street, and naturally when the Revolution changed the great affairs of the nation, the smaller ones did not go unattended. Williams court, which ran back of the present Herald building, was in old days Savage's court,

named after a Major Thomas Savage, who was a well-known townsman of early days. Brattle street was Hiller's lane and Elm street was Wing's lane. Union street, on which stood the famous Green Dragon Tavern, the scene of the meetings of the Sons of Liberty presided over by Paul Revere, is the same to-day; there is no record of any other name, and long may it continue to bear it! Tradition says that on the lower or north corner of this street, where the sign of the Blue Ball was known to be, that great man, statesman, philosopher, scientist, and above all patriot, Benjamin Franklin, was born. He was baptized in the Old South Church, opposite to which, in Milk street, the family afterwards removed.

Doane street was Lobster alley; Atkinson street, now Congress street, was Gray's lane; High street was Cow lane; Broad street was Flounder lane; Kilby street was Cooper's alley; Bromfield street was Rawson's lane; Federal street was Long lane; and so on *ad infinitum*. An eminent man was Edward Rawson, who lived in the lane bearing his name. He was chosen annually Secretary of the Massachusetts Bay Colony for thirty-six years until after the government fell into the hands of Sir Edmund Andros.

Edward Rawson lived on what is now one of the busiest of our narrow streets, Bromfield. He became in 1636 or '37 a resident of the old town of Newbury, and held office there until in 1650, having been elected Secretary of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay, he removed to Boston and lived thereafter until his death, in 1693, in the lane which bore his name until 1800. For one hundred and fifty years Edward Rawson's name was honored in that of the name of the lane in which he lived, and no good reason has ever been given why it was changed to that of Bromfield. He is more honored to-day in the town of Newbury, by the retention of the name of Rawson's meadow to a plot of ground he once owned there, than he is in this city. He lies buried in the Old Granary Burial-ground.

One old landmark of ancient Boston is the site of the first

tavern located in this town. One Samuel Cole was the first innkeeper; his house was opened for custom in 1634. It was in Corn court and delightfully situated, having a fine view of the harbor. Then the tide came up to Dock square. From the first it was a popular resort. In October, 1636, Gov. Sir Henry Vane entertained, with his twenty followers, a celebrated sachem of the Narragansett tribe of Indians. In 1700 the house was reconstructed; later on, before the Revolution, it shared with the Green Dragon in the meetings of the patriotic townsmen, and was undoubtedly a resort for many who participated in throwing overboard the tea in December, 1773, who disguised themselves there as Indians.

On the election in 1780 of John Hancock as governor, whatever name it had was changed to the "Hancock Tavern," which it has ever since retained. On the death of Hancock, in 1793, the sign, having painted on it a life-size figure of the governor, was draped in crape and satin for a long period. It hung there until within the last half-century, when it was blown down, killing a passer-by.

In 1794 the old fox Talleyrand lived there, and in 1796 John Cheverus, who had left France to escape the horrors of the French Revolution and afterwards became the first Roman Catholic bishop of Boston, resided there; and in 1797, just one hundred years ago, Louis Philippe, afterwards king of the French, resided there, while he gave lessons to the young ladies in his native language. The old tavern is said to be a close imitation of the English coffee-house so well described by Dickens in his "Pickwick."

Another relic of the last century is now lying at the Charlestown Navy Yard, the old frigate "Constitution," built by Edmund Hart, a Boston boy. Her fame is a part of the nation's history, and her centennial has just been celebrated. She is the only living link between the old navy and the new, and the prayer of every American should be, "Heaven save her from despoiling hands!"

The first block of houses erected in Boston was the range called "Tontine" in Franklin place, now Franklin street, on which there is not now a single residence, which up to 1792 had been a quagmire, until it was drained and laid out by its owner, Joseph Barrell, who was the owner of a summer residence, afterwards the McLean Asylum for the Insane, at Somerville. In the area of this plot of ground was an urn to the memory of Dr. Benjamin Franklin.

The second row of buildings erected in the town was on the west side of Court street in 1800, between Howard street and Bowdoin square. South row, near the Old South Church, was built about the same time; Hamilton place, opposite Park-street Church, was made in 1806; and Bumstead place shortly after. Pinckney street, Hancock and Myrtle streets, and the whole extent of Mount Vernon street were a dreary waste in 1799, on which only three decent houses were to be seen, but began in the same year to be covered with rows of handsome and fashionable residences. Beacon hill and all the hills west of it were levelled, and the earth taken out and carried down to fill up the mill pond where now stands the northern depot.

No paper bearing upon the old town of Boston would be in any way worth attention without at least an allusion to the tea party which was given on Griffin's wharf on Dec. 16, 1773, or to the Boston massacre which took place on State street in front of the Merchants Bank on ~~Jan.~~ 5, 1770. The last event was undoubtedly the work of a mob whose bad feelings were engendered by the previous hasty action of a few British soldiers towards the townsmen, who were inflamed by their acts. When the soldiers who had fired upon the townsmen were brought to trial they were defended by John Adams and Josiah Quincy, the patriots, showing conclusively there was no political significance to the affair. The throwing overboard of the tea in 1773 was a different matter for which there was a good and sufficient reason — "no taxation without representation." Dr. Franklin, then in London,

wrote home that "the British ministry believe that 3d. a pound upon tea of which one does not drink ten pounds a year is sufficient to overcome all the patriotism of an American." Bancroft, in his history of the United States, says that the destruction of the tea in Boston harbor in December, 1773, "merits a more thorough and particular consideration than it has yet received." Without going into a detailed history of the event, let me say that it was one of the ante-revolutionary happenings that have passed into the history of our country, and was participated in by a body of patriots composed of such men as Samuel Adams, Joseph Warren, Paul Revere, and other Sons of Liberty of the day. Joseph Warren was a leader in this affair, which had been discussed at the meetings of the "Sons of Liberty" in the old Green Dragon Tavern; and there is every reason to believe that John Hancock, Thomas Melville, the last of the cocked-hats, Joseph Webb and Henry Purkett, and other personal friends of the hero of Bunker Hill, were at least cognizant of if they did not have a hand in it. It was this act of the Bostonians which brought King George III. to a decision that America must be subdued by force of arms.

Prior to the Revolution, before the days of vaccination, we are told that it was a custom to hold small-pox parties, at which the guests were inoculated and were shut up for a time from the world. In a letter dated July 8, 1776, is the following account of an invitation to one:

"Mr. Storer has invited Mrs. Martin to take the small-pox at his house. If Mrs. Wentworth desires to get rid of her fears in the same way we will accommodate her the best way we can. I've several friends that I've invited and none of them will be more welcome than Mrs. W."

The praises of our beautiful Common, as it has been called almost from time immemorial, have been sung over and over again. The stranger, coming to us from a distance, does not think his pilgrimage complete until he has taken in this wonderful spot, with its ancient elms and charming bit of water.

To the native-born, also, the Common has its wonderful attractions; one saunters over its paths on a warm summer day in the shade of its overhanging trees, solacing himself with the reflection that the spot was dedicated in good old colonial times to the service of the people as their training-ground and pasture-field, from which chrysalis state it has blossomed forth into as near perfection as land and water can be made, — a park so elegant in its loveliness that it has no compeer in this or any other country, — and it is not an infrequent remark to hear from the returned traveller, "I long to have a sight of old Boston Common."

But the Common has not always had a pleasant history. The Great Elm, which was blown down in 1860, the product of our indigenous forests, had attained a great age; it was undoubtedly standing when the Puritans landed; it was more for its beautiful proportion and graceful limbs, and for the associations with its history, than for its age and size, that it attained notoriety. I can well remember the feeling of the community when the news spread through the city that the old elm was blown down. It seemed as if the event was a personal affliction.

Notwithstanding its beauty and grace, its largest limb was put to an ignoble purpose, for it was upon it that the executions of early days were performed. Here it was that Mary Dyer, the friend of the celebrated Ann Hutchinson, met her fate, after mounting the ladder for the second time; and under the leafy folds of the great tree Woodbridge met his death in a duel with his, until then, friend Phillips — two youths, hardly of age, who came to high words in the Royal Exchange Tavern on King street.

Another eminent man in his day was John Hull. He united with the First Church under Rev. John Norton in 1648. He became commander of the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company in 1671, and was a magistrate of the colony for many years. He, with Edward Rawson and a score of others, seceded from the First Church in 1669, and

founded the Third or Old South Church on the corner of Milk street and Washington street. The first building lasted about sixty years, when a new church was erected, the first service in which was held in 1735; the first sermon was preached by Rev. Joseph Sewall, the son of Judge Samuel Sewall, who married the daughter of John Hull. Richard Grant White, the Shakespearian scholar, said of this structure that it was the perfect model of a New England meeting-house of the highest style in the olden time; nothing more light and graceful can be found unless in the finest Gothic work. It is not a copy nor an imitation of anything else, but the conception of a Yankee "architect."

John Hull became the mint master of the colony and so continued until 1685, a period of more than thirty years. For his services he received one shilllng in every twenty that he coined, and these were the well-known pine-tree shillings, now so valuable for their rarity and antiquity. It is a story that Charles II. became angry with the Massachusetts Bay Colony for invading his prerogative of coining money, to which Sir Thomas Temple answered that the tree on the shilling was "the royal oak which preserved your Majesty's life," at which the king was pleased. Hawthorne, in his story for children of "Grandfather's Chair," no doubt familiar to you all, has immortalized a legend that when John Hull's daughter Hannah was married he gave her weight in pine-tree shillings as a dower. As the young lady weighed 125 pounds, which came to 1,500 ounces, she must have received 10,000 shillings, or $2,500, as her marriage portion. John Hull died in 1683, and was buried, with many other ancient worthies who have been mentioned, in the Old Granary Burying-ground.

To digress a little and go back to some of the old records of the early days of the town, to show our ancestors' idea of justice combined with a grim sense of humor, it is stated that in 1640 one Edward Palmer was hired to build a pair of stocks in which vagrants and transgressors were to be put

for punishment; on being adjudged as asking too great a price for them he was sentenced to be put in them for one hour, and thus he became the first to try his own work. Josias Plastow for stealing four baskets of corn from the Indians was sentenced to return eight baskets, to be fined five pounds, and be simply called "Josias," without the "Mr.," in future. In 1649 it was ordered that no person should play at shuffle-board or bowling, under a heavy penalty. In 1652 Richard Woody was admitted an inhabitant of the town on condition that he shall not be offensive by his trade, but what his trade was will never be known, for the records are silent about it. Samuel Lovell was admonished to take heed of light carriage; so was Catherine Cornish — a light o' love of that day. John Wedgwood was set in the stocks for being in company with drunkards, but nothing is said of any punishment being inflicted on the drinkers. Nicholas Knoop was fined five pounds for taking on himself to cure the scurvy with a water of no value, which he sold at a dear price. What a pity that our modern quacks could not be similarly treated!

But the old town went on prospering, and in the early part of the present century began to be what it now is — one of the loveliest spots on the continent, with beautiful surroundings beyond what any other city can boast of possessing. The iron heel of commerce and the march of improvement have gone on treading out the old and bringing in a new order of things, appealing in their results not only to the citizen but the stranger as one of the beautiful places worked out through the instrumentality of man in His own good time.

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